

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Father involvement in early childrearing and behavioural outcomes in their pre-adolescent children: evidence from the ALSPAC UK birth cohort

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BMJ Open 2016;6:012034

In most societies traditionally the father's role in child-rearing has been seen as that of 'provider' with the mother carrying out most of the caring tasks. However, in recent years societal changes have led to a rapid increase in working mothers and also changes in employment legislation, such as increased paternity leave. This has allowed more parenting duties to be shared by both parents. Understanding the nature and effect of fathers' involvement on their children's health and well-being could help inform future policies which aim to improve family psychological and health outcomes.

Parenting in the child's early years plays an important role in influencing the child's well-being and mental health, both in the short and long-term. This includes their social development, as well as cognitive and educational outcomes. The years preceding adolescence are marked by rapid physical growth, cognitive change and the development of social awareness and skills. Although the extent of the father's involvement in parenting may change over the child's life, early paternal involvement is associated with continuing engagement and may be a measure of overall engagement. Early parenting can also affect outcomes later in life. This study was therefore interested in whether fathers' involvement early in the child's life was associated with the child's later mental health and social development. The child's behaviour as a component of mental health was examined, in particular, because of its link with cognitive and educational outcomes.

Paternal involvement is multifaceted and can be characterised by fathers' frequency of contact with the child, co-residence with the child, presence at the child's birth, engagement in childcare activities such as playing and feeding, and responsibility towards providing for the child's material and emotional needs. Previous studies have tended to focus on paternal involvement as unidimensional, focusing solely on whether or not the father was involved with his children in any regard. However, the evidence for the effect of the father's involvement on children's mental health outcomes is unclear, thus a more multi-dimensional approach may be needed.

This paper aimed to identify the multi-dimensional aspects of paternal involvement and their potential influence on pre-adolescent children's behaviour. The relationship between father's involvement in the child's upbringing at eight weeks and eight months and the child's behavioural outcomes at age 9 and 11 years were examined, with the hypothesis that greater early paternal involvement would be associated with positive behavioural outcomes.

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Children of fathers who were characterised as having a positive emotional response to parenting and felt secure in their parenting role early in the child's life were less likely to show behavioural problems at ages 9 and 11. This may reflect positive ways of behaving and interacting in the longer term.

The amount of paternal involvement with childcare and household tasks was not associated with later child behavioural problems. This may be possibly because the amount of paternal childcare could simply have been reflecting temporary circumstances and needs due to employment or lack of extended family support.

Paternal involvement may encompass different aspects of how fathers interact with their children and partners, with these differing in their effects on child outcomes. A father's depth of interest is associated with a variety of positive outcomes for children, however, there has not previously been consistent evidence for whether it contributes towards mental health outcomes. For example, paternal involvement in childcare and supportive behaviour and affection towards children have previously been shown to be associated with fewer behavioural problems in children aged three and 5 to 18 years respectively. Fathers' involvement in childcare is also positively linked with cognitive outcomes in 2 to 6 year olds. However, studies have not found evidence of fathers' involvement in childcare having an effect on behavioural outcomes, which suggests the quantity of fathers' involvement may not be as important as the *type* of involvement and attitude towards parenting, as highlighted by this study.

Positive parenting by fathers may contribute to good outcomes in children in several ways. Involved fathers may influence children indirectly, such as by providing emotional support to mothers who are the main caregivers. This may lead to better outcomes in children due to the mothers' well-being and her parenting strategies. Father's involvement may also alleviate the impact of maternal depression, which is known to increase children's risk of behavioural problems. It may also lead to, or be a result of, a happy and cohesive family which may bring about better outcomes in children. There is scope for further research concerning the role of fathers, such as the effect of paternal involvement on other mental health outcomes for example identity, self-esteem and emotional and social development and how these outcomes vary over time. The effect of paternal involvement on child behaviour may become less important over time, such as in the adolescent period when other factors such as peer relationships, age and gender start to exert more influence.

Psychological and emotional aspects of paternal involvement in the infant years are the most powerful factors influencing later child behaviour, rather than the amount of time fathers spend on childcare or domestic tasks. It is not the amount of direct involvement in childcare at this early time in the child's life, but the way new fathers see themselves as parents, how they value their role as a parent and how they adjust to the role that are associated with positive behavioural outcomes in children.

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